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The LaPrade Case

J. WALLACE LAPRADE, who has been fired from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, must have a strange idea of what a scapegoat is. He charged Thursday that he had been made one because of his role in the FBI's "black bag" jobs of a few years ago. But a scapegoat is one who bears the blame for others. We can't figure out just whose blame other than his own Mr. LaPrade thinks he is bearing.

Mr. LaPrade was in charge of the FBI's New York office, which was involved in most of those burglaries. Attorney General Griffin Bell chose not to indict him for his part in those operations but did authorize the indictments of three of his superiors in the bureau's headquarters here. He then fired Mr. LaPrade, evidently not for his participation in those events but for his refusal to talk about them to his superiors in the Department of Justice and to a grand jury. Mr. LaPrade escaped being indicted for lying to that grand jury only because Mr. Bell vetoed the action.

Like many others in the FBI, Mr. LaPrade no doubt feels abused because the rules under which he was trained have been changed. He and others like him might well make the charge of scapegoat stick if they were the ones facing criminal charges. But they are

not. Their superiors are. In deciding not to indict agents in the field like Mr. LaPrade, Attorney General Bell recognized that in J. Edgar Hoover's FBI the greatest sin was disobeying an order, and those agents were doing only what Washington told them to do. Mr. LaPrade does not seem to recognize how well off he is.

The theme of his complaint seems to be that FBI agents have no obligation to answer questions fully and truthfully when they are asked by officials of the Department of Justice or a grand jury. Because the Attorney General is insisting that they do, Mr. LaPrade has accused him of trying "to exert political influence" over the FBI and destroy its independence. His thesis reflects a gross misunderstanding. Although the FBI did once operate "independently," it did so only because of Mr. Hoover's unique position. It was—and is—an arm of the Department of Justice; the Attorney General and the president are ultimately responsible. Mr. Bell's efforts to assert control over the FBI are aimed solely at ensuring that its officials are held accountable before the law for their actions and that the bureau never again functions "independently" of the law.